



Faculty ‘Marvel’ at Selvaggio’s Accomplishments

Blind Student to Graduate May 14 with Two Degrees from Southeast

CAPE GIRARDEAU, Mo., May 10, 2011 -- Tony Selvaggio of St. Louis, with his faithful companion Marvel at his side, is set to cross the stage at Southeast Missouri State University’s commencement ceremony May 14, signaling the completion of an amazing accomplishment.

A transfer student from Meramec College, Selvaggio will graduate with a bachelor of science degree with a major in mass communication, public relations and advertising options, and a bachelor of arts degree with a major in communication studies. Selvaggio is also blind.

The student who spent three years at Southeast earning two degrees lost his sight in early spring 2005 due to the autoimmune disease, sympathetic ophthalmia. He had surgery to repair a detached retina nearly two years earlier which left him with scar tissue forming on the retina. Two months later, he says he underwent a corrective surgery to remove the scar tissue, but in the process, inflammation occurred, attacking his eyes, and he immediately lost all vision in his left eye. Over the next two years, his sight in his right eye would diminish gradually.

Despite this devastating consequence, Selvaggio displays an astonishingly positive outlook on life.

“Losing my sight like that never really affected me,” he said. “I knew I was going to be totally blind, and I thought of it as just

With his guide dog, Marvel, at his side, Tony Selvaggio will walk across the stage May 14 and receive his diploma from Southeast Missouri State University. Marvel will be dressed for the occasion as well with a graduation gown provided compliments of Herff Jones.

another part of life.”

Selvaggio said his parents, Jan and Frank Selvaggio of St. Louis, took it a little harder, but they have been very supportive since the beginning.

“I think it affected them more. The natural parental instinct of protecting their child took over, but this was something they couldn’t control or fix, but they tried to stay positive. They have been really supportive the whole time, allowing me to take part in sports and eventually letting me leave home to attend Southeast,” Selvaggio said.

He enrolled in the Missouri School for the Blind high school in St. Louis as a senior and held himself back a year to ensure that he would be adequately prepared for a successful college career later on, he said. In those two years, Selvaggio thrived. He joined the school’s track and field, wrestling, swimming, goal ball and public speaking teams, and also began participating in athletics through the U.S. Association of Blind Athletes (USABA), he said. He graduated from the Missouri School for the Blind high school in 2006.

Since then, he has had great success, especially in track and field, and has had opportunities to participate in track and field competitions in Colorado, Atlanta and Brazil.

These types of opportunities, along with Selvaggio’s natural upbeat personality, are the reasons why he says becoming blind is one of the best things that ever happened to him.

“I have had more opportunities in the past six years of being blind than I had my whole life before losing my vision,” said Selvaggio, whose positive outlook on life is infectious.

Last year, he completed a communications internship with the USABA national governing body for the U.S. Olympic Committee.

He also has become very involved in public

speaking, enjoying it so much he hopes to make a career of it after graduation, he says. His involvement with USABA led him to speak to hundreds of people on numerous occasions. Since January, Selvaggio has spoken at four different events in St. Louis, Kansas City and Branson.

Selvaggio says one of the most memorable days he has had since he became blind was in 2008 when he was in California training with his best friend and side-kick, Marvel, his guide dog.

"It was a great day because I was so excited to finally get a beautiful guide dog, and I also received the phone call from Southeast which informed me of my room assignment, move-in day and other general information letting me know I was accepted into the University," he said.

Marvel, a beautiful yellow Labrador retriever, became an instant mascot for every class Selvaggio attended at Southeast. If Selvaggio's smile and energetic personality didn't make enough of an impression, his gentle, friendly side-kick did. Friends and faculty members agree that Selvaggio's faithful companion is by far the most popular "kid" on campus.

Selvaggio, a member of the Delta Chi fraternity, says with Marvel by his side, he has few difficulties with everyday tasks other than going to stores and eating at Towers Café.

"Buffets are not a blind man's friend," Selvaggio jokes.

He says Southeast has been welcoming and accommodating to him since his enrollment, providing him with his own room that is centralized in an ideal location. He says Disability Services helped him by initially notifying his professors he is blind and by getting his books for him, but he tries to be as independent as possible with everything else.

In his time at Southeast, Selvaggio says he

has learned maturity and independence, and it has provided him with a simulation of the real world.

While he says all his professors have been understanding and inspirational, one professor has made a lasting impression on him on dealing with life and his future profession.

"I can't say enough good things about Mr. (Michael) Simmons, my advertising teacher. All my professors have been great, but he inspired me to pursue my advertising major by finding ways to involve me in the courses. Advertising is very visual and design-focused, so he taught me how to describe my ideas and build my confidence in the field," Selvaggio said. "He really accepted me for who I am and found a place for me in advertising."

As much as Simmons, instructor of mass media at Southeast, has made an impact on him, Selvaggio has made a great impact on Southeast students and faculty alike.

"Tony is such a great inspiration to me and everyone in the department. I've never seen him in a bad mood. He always has a smile and he never complains. It is difficult for anyone to argue with the kind of success Tony has had here," said Bonnie Gerecke, administrative assistant in the Department of Mass Media. "I will miss passing by the computer lab and seeing Marvel stretched out under the tables at her master's feet, but I am sure she and Tony will be on to bigger and better things."

"His positive outlook on life is infectious, and whenever I would see Tony and Marvel, Tony always had a smile on his face and an upbeat comment to share," added Dr. Tamara Baldwin, chair of the Department of Mass Media. "I cannot wait to hear about what new goals Tony tackles next. He will make those look easy too."

It is safe to say Selvaggio lives by the advice he shares with Southeast students.

"The only disability in life is a bad attitude," he said.

While Tony hopes to pursue a career in public speaking, he says he wouldn't mind a job in advertising as well. He ultimately, however, wants to show people that being blind is not a disadvantage. In fact, he says, it has made him a better person.

"Every college senior is facing the same million-dollar question: What's next?" Selvaggio said. "Whatever I choose to do, I know I won't be average. Being blind won't allow me to. I'll either be at a major disadvantage in my career or I'll be exceptional."

It seems almost obvious Selvaggio will be nothing less than exceptional.